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Henry Ford's Booty Call

Written August, 2007.

Talk about some weird-ass history falling through the cracks...this is a strange one that sounds more like an urban legend whipped up by some UAW grunts in a break room one night. But it seems to be true by all accounts, though I doubt you will ever hear any authorities verify it on the record, especially Ford Motor Company or the Ford family. As Henry Ford himself once famously said, "History is more or less bunk."



In a weird pocket of swampy woods in Dearborn Heights there is a rotten old ruin of a mansion tangled in the woods, once known as the "River Oaks Mystery House." I myself didn't learn the full breadth of its wacky history until after I had explored it.

Here' goes:
According to *The Novi*, an article by Dick Ralstin about an experimental 1934 Indy racecar, a man named Raymond Dahlinger worked in the Ford Development & Engineering Dept., and collaborated in the development of the famous Flathead Ford V8. This Ray Dahlinger was a close friend of Henry Ford, and I have heard that he was also Henry's personal chauffeur. Henry Ford, who was married (to Clara Ford), took a shine to a Ms. Evangeline Cote, and the two became "romantically entangled." In fact, they are supposed to have bore a son in 1923. It is rumored that Henry Ford asked Ray Dahlinger to marry Evangeline as a favor, in order to give the illegitimate child a proper father, and the mother a provider...hence a better, more socially appropriate life for the two. It would also help obscure Henry's naughty little boo-boo.

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Evangeline's maiden name was Cote, and she was the daughter and sister of the owners of the Cote Motor Company, based in Ferndale (just north of Detroit), which incidentally sprung up right after she gave birth to Henry's illegitimate son (seemingly almost as a form of dowry to their family from Ford). The child, John Dahlinger, was raised by Ray Dahlinger as a son, and lived a strange life of semi-privilege, wherein he was a (semi) beneficiary of one of the most powerful men in the world, Henry Ford. Yet he was still also just that mysterious black sheep offspring that was always lurking on the periphery of the Ford family but had no claim to the line of succession in the company.

For instance, he was promised a fat inheritance upon Henry's death (though he got stiffed in the end), and he was often given strange gifts...such as for instance when he turned seven, he received the winning car from the Indy 500 as a present. The actual car. When he started school (a school coincidentally built by—you guessed it—Henry Ford), John also was allowed to use the old school desk Henry had used as a boy. There are also pictures of John playing with the Ford grandchildren, who were the same age as him.



The Dahlingers also mysteriously received a brand-new mansion on Ford-owned land, right upriver from Henry's own Fairlane Estate. Fairlane and the Dahlinger Estate straddled the Dearborn/Dearborn Heights border, and both houses sat on the banks of the Rouge River. The unofficial Ford historian, who coincidentally enough is named Ford R. Bryan, mentions the Dahlingers in his book, *Beyond the Model T: The Other Ventures of Henry Ford*. Bryan has written six books on Ford. Evangeline Dahlinger remained Henry's mistress for some time, and was said to have had quite a bit of influence behind many of Henry's business decisions, such as the development of Greenfield Village.

Oz, The RenCen, and
Another Narrow Escape

Henry Ford's Booty Call

Ruins From My Own Past

Making MCS Fun Again
(Part 2)

Making MCS Fun Again
(Part 1)

SUNDAY!! SUNDAY!!
SUNDAY!!!

The Federal Indian
School

Becoming the Hunted

Kresge's & the Traver
Building

The League of Union
Clubs

Blue Light Special

Rooftop Movie Chase
Scene

Eloise Asylum, 2005

Eloise Asylum, 2004

Escape From McLouth
Steel

Call It Norf' Country, Eh

Tough Times Don't Last;
Tough People Do

Ubi Sunt?

Louder Than Your Ma

The Three Christs of
Ypsilanti

Tithing the Red Metal
King (Part 4)

Tithing the Red Metal
King (Part 3)

Tithing the Red Metal
King (Part 2)

Tithing the Red Metal
King (Part 1)

The Fall of the House of
Burrowes

2004, and The Eddystone

Visitation Rights

Wooden Shoes, Kitty
Litter, Hydroelectric
Power, a...

Building As Art

Corktown Shenanigans

I Am My Brother's Keeper

Harumph!

Behind the 8-Ball

Chasing Swamp Lights

Secret Road Maps of
Henry Ford



It was no coincidence that the Dahlinger Estate was built right on the Rouge River, just north of Henry's own pad. Henry orchestrated this so that he could slip away and sail his boat up the Rouge, and sneak into her place for some quick boning (or, I guess they called it "making whoopee" back then), then romantically sail away, back down the river. John Dahlinger himself described this in a book he wrote in 1978 entitled *The Secret Life of Henry Ford*, saying that when Henry built the house for Raymond and Evangeline, he had a secret stairway added in, which went from the back of the house up to Evangeline's dressing room.



John writes,

"Before I tell you about the main house that Ford built for us, I'd better let you know that Mother was a fireplace freak, as the young would label her today. The main house has nine fire-places, one more fireplace than it has bathrooms. It also has a four-car garage with a mechanic's hoist so that a Ford expert could come and make repairs on the spot.

There are comfortable servants' quarters, and a flower room, where flowers could be arranged for the other rooms without messing up those rooms. There is a refrigerated fur-storage vault. There was a room for an indoor pool, which, however, could never be installed, because the Rouge River would overflow and cause drainage back-up.

There is even a secret staircase. It is hard to know whether even Dad knew that this secret entrance to Mother's dressing room was being installed. This is indeed the major secret of the house. A person could go into a certain small room downstairs and disappear into the secret staircase that led up to Mother's suite. One could also leave the same way without being observed.

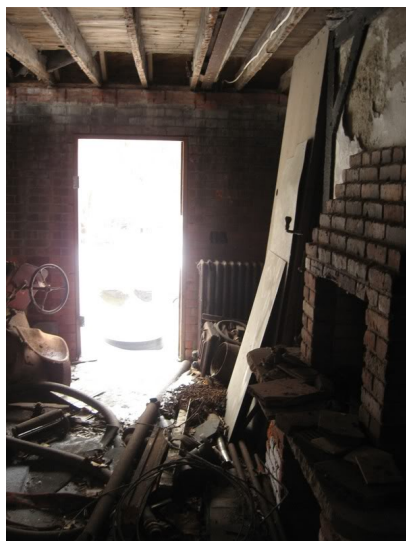
Mother had at her disposal the Ford craftsmen, many of whom had been brought from Europe to work at Greenfield Village—including woodcarvers and ironsmiths. The house was her magnificent obsession. She kept changing and revising the house plans.

Sometimes a wall was torn down and moved a foot in one or the other direction. Once, when she changed her mind, all the furnace ducts had to be moved to conform with her revised wishes, and the furnace men had to be called back."



Ford R. Bryan's book says:

"In his book Dahlinger describes that the home that his family lived in was built for them and then sold to them for the sum of \$1. They bought 150 acres to make the transaction legal. This estate has always been known as the Dahlinger estate including a gate barn with a 24-hour guard, a Kentucky show barn, a working barn, a single-story stall barn with corrals, a blacksmith's shop, a lake with skating house, a quarter-mile cinder track, a 6-car garage, a beautiful middle sized house, a greenhouse with servants quarters, a boathouse, a farmhouse with 3 garages and a main house. Because his mother, Mrs. Dahlinger, was in love with fireplaces there were nine in the main house."



As you can see, the "Mystery House" is quite decrepit today, and almost unexplorable on the interior. I cannot say that I saw a "secret" stairway, though to be fair I was not looking for one at the time, and there is a good chance it rotted away anyhow. I am also not sure whether this is the actual house or the "middle sized house," or what has been demolished versus what remains. What I can say is that it certainly was set up oddly. Before I knew the real story, I had already come to the conclusion that it was owned by a very eccentric person. Strangely enough, there were a couple rooms that were absolutely filled with automotive junk, though the motor you can see here is not a Ford, but an Oldsmobile V8:



I am thinking it may have been Raymond Dahlinger's leftover clutter; since he was a gearhead and a racer it stands to reason. Under this thing here was what looked to be a bricked-up and backfilled tunnel:



There is a definite "thing" with Henry Ford and secret tunnels and passageways. There is of course the rumor of an escape tunnel leading out from underneath the Rouge Plant which Henry had built for himself in case of another labor riot like the Hunger March of 1932, or an assassination attempt on his life. Henry was a well known escape artist; by that I mean it is documented that he went to lengths to ensure that he would never be cornered in his office with someone he didn't want to talk to. He liked being able to disappear whenever he wanted, to get away from the press, or whoever he was currently at odds with.

I knew a guy named Jeff who was an old Michigan Bell Telephone Co. veteran who worked on the frames in every Ford plant in Michigan during the 1990s. We got to talking and he confirmed that there is indeed not just one, but several "secret" tunnels underneath the city of Dearborn, built for Ford's personal use to get to and from work every day. One led from the Rouge Plant to the Proving Grounds/Experimental Lab, and from there a tunnel went out and forked in two directions: Henry Ford Museum, and Henry's home, Fairlane. Not only that, but underneath Greenfield Village is a honeycomb of passageways.

I already knew that there were ventilation and steam utility tunnels under the Henry Ford Museum / Ford Experimental Laboratory complex (I managed to step into them momentarily once, and I still know how to get in, but to be honest I am too much of a chicken haha), so to hear Jeff corroborate my suspicions was cool. Jeff told me that he was the phone frame guy at the Ford Engineering Lab, which was why he had access to the tunnels under Dearborn. Sometimes he had to work down in the tunnels, which he said required an ultra-special Ford ID pass card. Many years later when I met Sabrina, who had worked at the Village for eight years, she told me that on rainy days when no one was around, she would go root around in the tunnels to check out all the cool stuff that Henry the notorious clutter-hound had stashed there over the years.



The best story Jeff told was that once he was approached by Ford Security with a phone bill for \$1,400 in calls made to 1-900 fucklines from William Clay Ford's personal office phone number. Since Jeff was the only one with access to the phone room, they suspected him of tapping the circuit at the frame and making the calls. They couldn't prove it, so they installed cameras in the phone room. Time went by, yet the phone bills to fucklines kept coming. Eventually the company brought in the FBI and their own phone techs to trace the line out, and they discovered who was making the calls.

The day they figured out what was going on, Ford Security requested Jeff's presence. He said they walked through the office section, and came to a door that he had always thought was just some closet. They opened it and it led into a weird narrow hallway with a small door at the end. They opened that and found a small office set up where some white collar employee had set himself up a secret little hideaway, complete with couch, TV, etc...on the wall was a jack bridged into the private line in question. As it turned out, they figured this small room was originally set up back in the day by Henry Ford himself as a secret office...because it was a place where he used to take his mistress Evangeline Dahlinger, to get busy, hahaha.

Hearsay, but take it for what it is. Tall tales about the early auto barons are common, but no one had more rumors swirling about him than Ford. Even Ford's head security man and bodyguard, Harry Bennett, had a mansion in Ypsilanti with secret passages known as Bennett Castle. He even had fake trees in his yard which were made of steel, and hollow with stairs inside, so as to be sniper posts.

* * *

On a very beautiful late-autumn day just before Halloween of 2010, Hank and I made a return trip to the Dahlinger Estate.



It had been quite awhile since I had been here, and she had never seen it. We decided to approach the main house for a closer look. I was uneasy, as the place had always creeped me out a little bit...I was almost positive it was still occupied to some extent, and I had a strong feeling that whoever still lived there was a very unpleasant Scrooge-like individual.



We also peeked into the root cellar for the first time.



After some fairly rough bush wacking we came within sight of the massive estate, looming at the head of a very long and wide field of mowed grass. It looked exactly the same as the first time I had seen it, in mid-2007. Back then I had come alone, and did not leave the safety of the wood's eaves. Then, as now, I had a strong feeling that despite the house's decrepitude and general disarray, it was occupied or watched over. That was before I knew of the houses's history and the infamous reputation of its original inhabitants.



This time, knowing full-well of the shadowy historical vines wreathing this mansion's past, I looked at it with a much different eye. Most importantly, I searched the banks of the Rouge River for any signs of a dock, or where one might have been.

It did not take long before I found something:



...Is this just erosion control, or perhaps the remnant of a dock foundation, where the great Henry Ford tied up his boat when engaging in the rumored late-night trysts with his mistress?

After this, Hank goaded me into stepping out onto the open field, and walking toward the back of the house for a closer look. While cautiously advancing I snapped pictures, and my eyes intently scanned the house and surround for any potential hostile movement. The house was eerily defenseless. No dogs barked, no curtains parted, no sounds of anyone nearby. The trees rustled their orange leaves in the rapidly setting sun as cool autumnal breezes swept the wide field. Our advance was unchecked though I could still not shake the feeling that we were being watched.



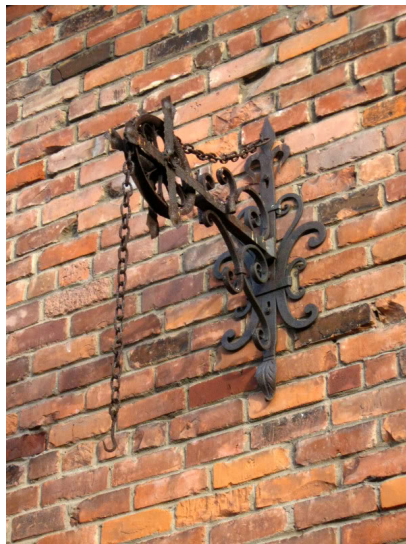
We could see now that this was quite an impressive house. I could not stop thinking about whose house it was, and the famous person who had it built. Eerie. We kept glancing at each other as we slowly inched forward. I kept my eyes on the windows, nervously waiting for the sight of a person staring down angrily at us....



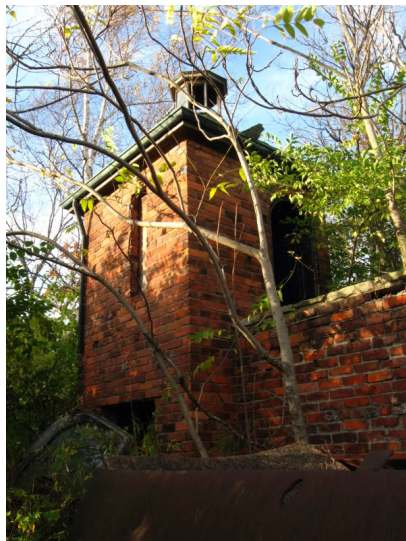
Then again, was this place finally abandoned...? Now I was starting to wonder. There was an enclosed area off the side of the house that we had skirted around to, fenced by a brick wall with what looked like a guard house at one corner.



This appeared to be a guest entrance, maybe like a circle drive, for people of some bearing to approach by auto and have their car taken by a valet as they enter the estate. There were several derelict vehicles present, and they were all Fords, even the tractors. A small "Romeo & Juliet"-esque balcony stood over it all, and a fancy lamp holder(?) was attached to the house below that:



We crept around in the bushes for a minute so I could snap a few more pictures...I was fascinated by the corner guard hut with the arched doorway and cupola:





We then went into the courtyard:



There was quite an assortment of junk, and off to one side, somewhat hidden in foliage, a wishing well...?





Off to the side there was a small iron gate leading back out:



This house was quite the architectural piece...but neglected. I was struck with a very strong *Fall of the House of Usher* vibe...



We both looked up through one of the windows and saw what appeared to be a kitchen or dining room light on. That's when we heard it...the unmistakable jingle of a dog collar, followed by the scratch of Rottweiler claws on pavement, coming our way.

Because of the direction of the wind they had thankfully not scented us yet, but we launched out of there so fucking fast that I almost ran right out of my boots.

So yeah, my morbid voyeuristic curiosity almost earned me a thorough maiming yet again.

Labels: Dahlinger Estate, Dearborn Heights, Ford, Michigan Bell, Wayne County

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